

Letter from the Amherst School Board Chair

Thank you for taking the time to review the articles up for your vote in this year's school elections. Much like last year, there are several items that will determine the immediate and long-term future of the Amherst School District. We have worked closely with Administration to put forth articles that are critical to the success of students in this district over the coming years. We have also worked closely with the community. We spent the year engaging in dialogue with residents in a variety of feedback sessions, coffees, information sessions, committee meetings, and school board meetings. We strive to keep residents up to date by providing a monthly letter in the Amherst Citizen, by making information available at the Amherst Town Library in paper form, and on the SAU 39 website. Our ultimate goal is to arrive at solutions that are supported by the community and that support our students so that they may flourish.

We look forward to seeing you at the polls on Tuesday, March 14.

Respectfully,
Tom Gauthier
Chair, Amherst School Board

Article 12 – School bond project - \$54,250,179

Review of 2022

The school ballot in 2022 laid out the Amherst School Board's long-term vision for the facilities of this district – a new Clark-Wilkins Elementary and a completely renovated Amherst Middle School. That proposal was the culmination of nearly five years of work between the Amherst School Board, administration, architects, construction, and engineering professionals, and the SAU 39 Joint Facilities Advisory Committee.

Following the March 2022 election, the board offered numerous community sessions to garner feedback regarding the defeated proposal. Many conversations with town leaders, business owners, SAU 39 school boards, school administration, and building leaders, and, most importantly, Amherst and Mont Vernon residents led the board to present the project you are seeing this year. A singular focus on the Elementary School and a plan to phase and prioritize work at the Amherst Middle School. While the space constraints and end of life maintenance needs at both schools remain, our Facilities Director, Building and Grounds Committee, and engineering and maintenance professionals have worked tirelessly to map a course of action that will meet the most immediate and pressing needs of our district.

The scope of the elementary project has been reviewed multiple times, in great detail. The design includes the proper square footage and space to run current programs, with options for future expansion should the need arise. Careful consideration has been taken to ensure that the design does not exceed the needed capacity. We have continued to partner with Banwell Architects and DEW Construction to ensure their expertise is reflected in design, costs, and quality of the project. NESDEC enrollment reports support this sizing.

Clark-Wilkins Project Details & Overview

The proposed project will create a one-building elementary school to serve preschool through fifth grade, allowing grade five to move from the Amherst Middle School to the elementary level. This shift from grade 5 out of AMS will begin to ease space constraints at the middle school.

Should the project pass in 2022, the bond sale would take place over the coming year with groundbreaking expected in summer of 2024. Completion of the project is projected to take place in summer 2026.

Facility Project Goals

Address the following:

- MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL/PLUMBING SYSTEMS - We are nearing the end of life for major systems at Wilkins— mechanical, electrical, plumbing, lighting, and roofing – and these will soon require significant investment to replace/repair.
- HEALTH & SAFETY - The portable classrooms still in use at Wilkins are end-of-life, detached from the main building, and do not benefit from the full security measures within the main building. Improve ventilation and climate control.
- STUDENT LEARNING - Our school buildings were constructed in a different generation. Education and best practices, as well as the list of required, state-mandated services, have evolved and increased. Facilities designed for contemporary public education delivery will allow our students to have the best education possible, including students with IEPs and 504 plans.
- SPACE CONSTRAINTS - Design one building that is flexible to accommodate current and future program and space needs, including special programs, full day kindergarten, pre-school, and the removal of portables.

Student Learning

Years of discussion have utilized one primary planning lens for our facilities— how do we augment or design spaces that provide the greatest opportunity and educational benefit for the children of this district. Factors such as lighting, indoor air quality, climate control, acoustics, and noise play a critical role in a student's ability to focus and learn new information. This board and this district rely on research and evidence-based instructional practices. A new building becomes a tailwind in our improvement journey, rather than a headwind.

The ability to implement the most optimal instruction is improved in a number of ways:

- Increased teacher collaboration space
- Private and dedicated office space for school counselors and administrators.
- Dedicated unified arts spaces. The current practice to meet enrollment requirements involves moving a unified arts teacher onto a cart to push into classroom learning spaces. This leads to lost instructional time and creates disruption and noise for neighboring classrooms.
- Current programming is driven by lunch schedules and the limitations of having one large communal space for lunch, physical education, and assemblies.
- Intervention space for one-on-one programming is shared, high-noise, and high-distraction. In the new building, these programs have dedicated and appropriate space.
- Library space in the new building supports the board and the administration's goals to improve literacy acquisition throughout the district.
- One building creates efficiencies for administrators, teachers, and supporting facilities and food services staff.

Educational Space

- The district has needed additional space for a number of years. In order to maintain, the administration has utilized temporary portables, moved staff and intervention space into closets, tripled and quadrupled interventionists (reading and math, speech) into one

shared space, and placed specialists on carts moving from classroom to classroom (instead of a dedicated teaching space).

- The DOE requirements for space have changed since the buildings were originally designed. The proposed project allows the district to adequately meet current DOE requirements without sacrificing storage closets and intervention space to do so.
- Special needs educational requirements have changed dramatically over the last 50 years. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public school districts to offer support and program options for students with a variety of needs. The district is also required to provide these services to Amherst children as early as age 3, before entering kindergarten. These programs currently encompass 8 classrooms across the district with a need for additional space.

Class Size & Enrollment

Keeping class sizes small to allow for better interaction between students and teachers continues to be a focus of the board. A community survey conducted in 2020 found that this was the number one concern among respondents as well.

Amherst School District has addressed staffing to meet the desired student-teacher ratio over the last four years, and it continues to be a priority in this year's budget (see Article 13). Class sizes are within a reasonable range but this exacerbates the sacrifices to educational space. For example, when an additional classroom is needed to maintain reasonable and appropriate class size goals, the result is one of the aforementioned integrated arts teachers moving from a dedicated space to a push-in model in individual classrooms. This is inefficient, leads to a loss of instruction time, and can be highly disruptive to neighboring classrooms.

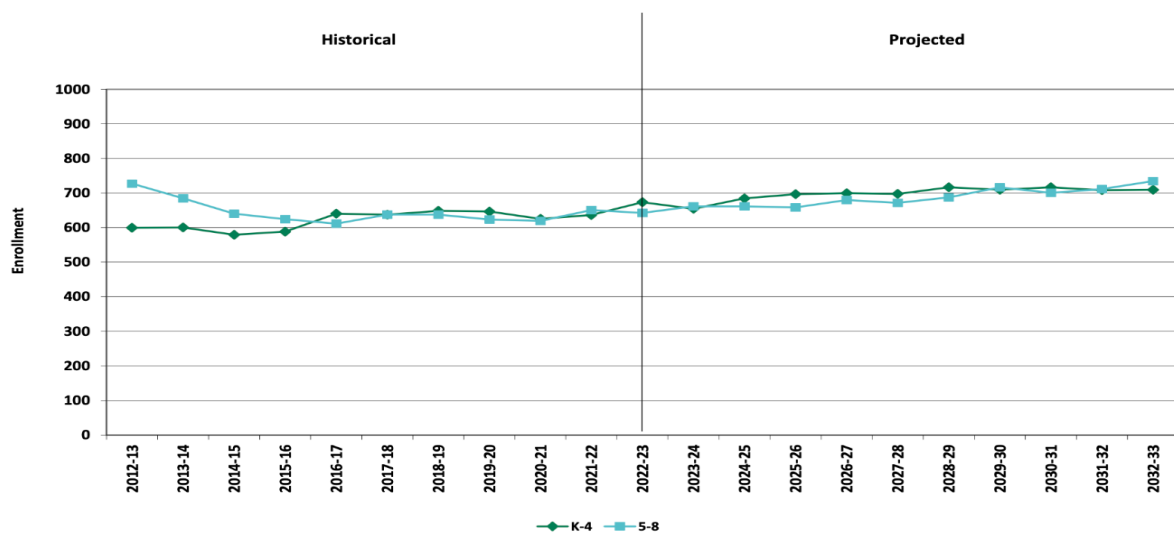
Since class size ratios have been addressed, additional teachers are not projected as a result of the building project. The addition or reduction of staff will be driven by enrollment demands. Enrollment projections are steady and allow the team to feel confident in the size of the proposed project. The following graphic highlights our expected class sizes for FY24.

Grade Level	Targets			NESDEC Projections FY 23	FY23 Current - Oct 1			FY 24 Projected		
	Min	Goal	Max	Enrollment	Enrollment	Teachers	Ratio	Enrollment	Teachers	Ratio
Kindergarten	15	17	19	124	121	6	20.2	106	7	15.1
Grade 1	16	18	20	133	140	8	17.5	136	8	17
Grade 2	16	18	20	131	132	6	22	151	7	21.6
Grade 3	18	20	22	125	123	6	20.5	133	6	22.2
Grade 4	18	20	22	151	157	7	22.4	128	6	21.3
Sub-Total				664	673	33	20.4	654	34	19.2
Grade 5	20	22	24	131	138	6	23	160	8	20
Grade 6	20	22	24	155	152	8	19	142	6	23.7
Grade 7	20	22	24	164	170	8	21.3	188	8	23.5
Grade 8	20	22	24	178	182	8	22.8	171	8	21.4
Sub-Total				628	642	30	21.4	661	30	22
Total				1292	1315	63	20.9	1315	64	20.5

Minimum or Below	Above Minimum	Maximum or above
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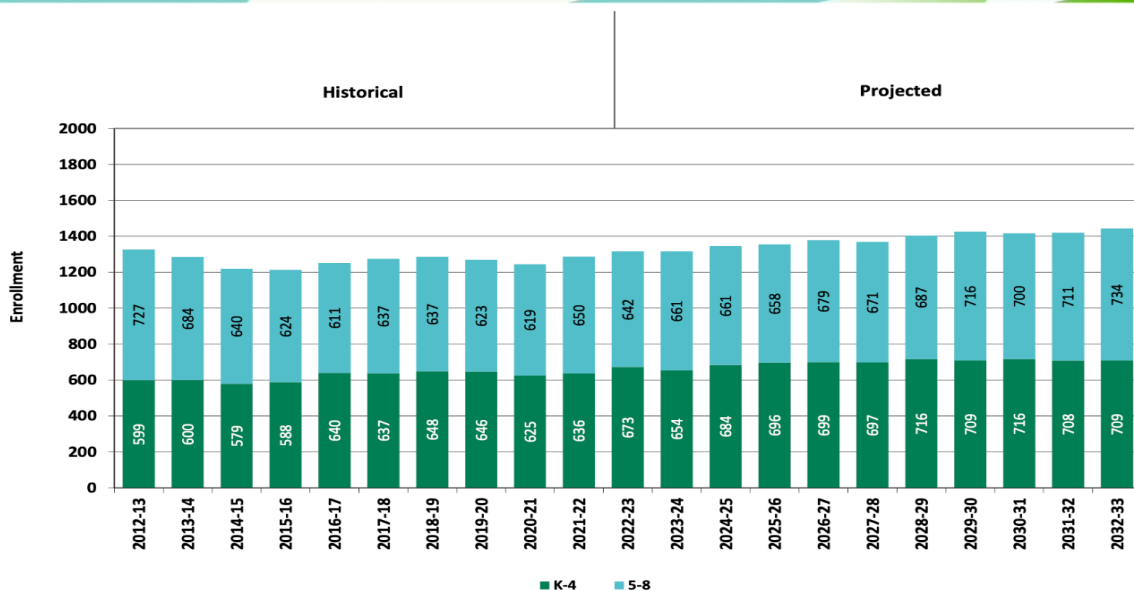
The building has been designed after thorough discussion of programming needs with administration and staff. The classroom design has a capacity of 889 students, while the core spaces are designed to accommodate 1,079 students. A professional, external enrollment report was completed to confirm enrollment data and the sizing of the proposed facility project for the application for NH DOE State Building Aid. NESDEC (New England School Development Council) was hired to create this enrollment report. The report provides 10 year projections and will be updated annually by NESDEC. The size of the building design is in line with the projected enrollment now and in the future and provides flexibility for the type of needs that arise within the school population. Should a need arise for additional space, the building will be constructed to accommodate a second floor with more classroom space over the street facing side of the first floor of the building, though this is not anticipated by the professional enrollment reports.

NESDEC Historical & Projected Enrollments in Grade Combinations



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Cost

Bond Requirements: Placing a dollar amount on the ballot for voters requires the formation of a cost estimate that becomes the legal high-water mark for district borrowing and spending on the project. The cost of the project is \$54,250,179. This cost includes all design work, system upgrades, renovations, additions, and sitework. As a result of the necessary high-water mark figure, when deciding what amount to put forward to voters, the board has chosen to be conservative in selecting a number that includes contingencies for unknown costs that may arise.

The cost estimates include several layers of contingencies that are appropriate for this phase of planning, including:

- Design contingency: covers costs associated with code compliance or unforeseen costs during the design phase
- Estimate contingency: covers costs that could arise as a result of the estimating process
- Escalation: covers increases in material and labor costs that will occur between now (when the estimate is created) and when the project is bid.
- Construction contingency: covers unexpected costs that could arise during the construction phase
- Owner's contingency: covers unexpected costs due to owner directed changes or unexpected site conditions

To assure residents that every possible step will be taken to keep costs down, a construction manager (CM) will oversee construction of the project and coordinate subcontractors. When the project is fully designed, the CM bids the entire project to subcontractors and works with the district to select the best bid for the community. Once that process concludes, the CM agrees to a guaranteed maximum price (GMP) to complete the project and is bound to deliver the project at that GMP. The district and community have full transparency into the bidding and costs of the project from start to finish.

It should be noted that throughout the project, every single dollar will be transparently accounted for and each unspent dollar in contingency or construction funds will be returned to taxpayers.

SAU39 has applied to the DOE for state building aid. Building aid is not guaranteed until after the bond passes per the timing of voting and state budget finalization. If approved, Amherst could be awarded 0%-30% aid. We cannot be awarded funds until a project has been supported by voters. Building projects were ranked on various criteria and awarded points to each of the following: safety and security, obsolete or inefficient conditions, overcrowding/increased enrollment, operational cost efficiency, maintenance program, and district's eligibility for free & reduced meals. The outside source reviewing our project, despite not being awarded any points in the largest category of eligibility for free & reduced meals, ranked this project seventh out of seventeen proposed projects for building aid priority, should aid be granted by New Hampshire's legislature.

By working with the New Hampshire Municipal Bond Bank (NHMBB), the taxpayers are granted a level of oversight that remains steady despite inevitable change in board members or administrators. The NHMBB will review our investments and refinance, if appropriate, throughout the life of the loan.

The board's original presentation at the bond hearing and public hearing in January structured bond repayment over a 30-year period. Since that presentation, we have shifted focus to a 25-year period, resulting in a lower projected interest rate with an estimated savings of \$14 million over the life of the loan.

The board is currently focused on level-debt repayment of the bond, ensuring the yearly impact is the same for current taxpayers as well as those living in the district in the future. **These decisions have been made with our best intentions based on current information, and subtleties could change in order to save taxpayers money when final bond rates are set.**

Elementary School Building Project Tax Impact and Total Cost, 25 Year Term

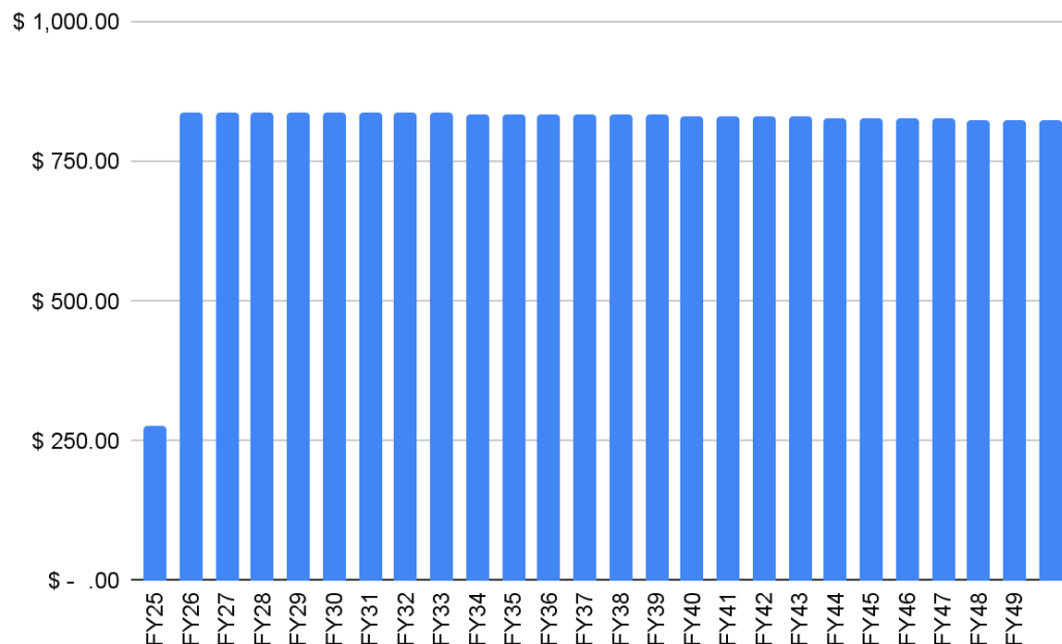
Tax Impact and Cost Assumptions				Total Cost	
Payment Type	Level Debt			Bond Amount	\$103,384,725
Assessed Valuation	\$2,362,984,237			Term *	\$54,250,179
Average Home	\$482,000			Interest Rate *	25 Years
					5.75%

Year	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33	FY34
Est. Tax Impact	\$0.57	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.74	\$1.73	\$1.73
Est. Cost/ Ave Home	\$277	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$839	\$834	\$834

June 2022 Bond Sale was 3.66%; NHMBB using 5.75% to be conservative for budgeting purposes

Based on the assumptions, a \$482,000 home will see an average tax impact of \$839 per year, or roughly \$70 per month.

Elementary School-Bond Financing Level Debt 25 Year Term



Clark-Wilkins Project Overview

- Renovation of multi-purpose room - 9,569 square feet
- New kitchen (including equipment)
- Asbestos abatement of current multi-purpose room
- Replacement of flooring, doors, and windows
- Technology upgrades
- Security upgrades
- Major addition - 136,660 square feet
 - New exterior envelope (brick, insulation, siding, roof, etc.)
 - New mechanical, electrical, plumbing systems including high efficiency HVAC
 - New interior (flooring, doors, windows, FFE, etc.)
- Sitework

Site plan



This is the initial site plan that was developed with the civil engineering firm of Tighe and Bond who have extensive school project experience in New Hampshire.

- Multiple play areas for multiple grades are a priority of the administration and board.
- A further traffic study will confirm the Jones Road access for emergency use and to alleviate Boston Post Road traffic during arrival and dismissal. The Board has been in touch with town committees who plan to review the traffic of the area in the next several years to ensure there is no doubling effort. Last year's study by the town was favorable for the traffic impact of combining Clark and Wilkins school buildings.
- There is increased parking for school and community events at the school and Upper Wilkins field as the car/bus loop will hold 75 cars in a 2 lane loop.

Front Approach



- The current multipurpose room is on the left and remains as it anchors the building to maintain the character of Amherst. Consider this the beginning of the design process, not the end. Design will evolve in partnership with the architects and will continue to be refined if the bond is approved.

First floor



Second floor



Phasing

Should Article 12 pass, design refinement and input sessions for community, staff, administration, and board will take place over the following 10 months. Construction is expected to begin in spring 2024 with completion in time for the 2026-2027 school year. During construction, all schools will remain open, utilizing current space to avoid rental costs of portable classrooms.

Next Steps for Amherst Middle School

Article 12 includes plans for the elementary level only.

Through conscious saving over the last four years into the capital reserve fund and paying particular attention to the capital needs assessment, we have identified needs and a long term funding plan to take necessary steps in facility improvement at AMS.

During this school year, AMS has experienced water damage from roof leaks and unit ventilator floods. These items were previously identified as part of the 2017 capital needs assessment and were part of the list of projects to be funded through the capital reserve funding. The board has approved funding for the design work related to these projects and the design work has begun. This will be a phased approach to first replace the original sections of the roof and the ventilators that are in most need of repair. The roof and unit ventilator replacement project is anticipated to cost more than \$1.3 million and will take the first step in making AMS water-tight. A more comprehensive plan is laid out in the voter's guide detailing Article 18 and will be delivered to the board in the spring.

The space constraints at AMS will be lessened by moving fifth grade to the elementary school while not requiring an addition to AMS.

Should Article 12 pass and the elementary project begin, the plans for updating the systems at AMS that are noted in the capital needs assessment and living document work will be funded through the capital reserve fund. A new elementary school building would allow the capital reserve funding to focus on improvements at the middle school rather than the need for those annual funds to be spread across the district.

Overall Program Advantages:

- Simple construction phasing to have the least impact to student learning
- Increases capacity of the cafeteria and gym at the elementary school, creating additional opportunities for community activities in the building
- Provides needed space for academic classes and team alignment
- Appropriate special education classroom and programming space
- Asbestos abatement
- Increased ventilation
- A greater degree of safety and security
- Upgrades and replaces mechanical systems near or at end-of-life
- Elementary school under one roof to include preschool through fifth grade
- Moving fifth grade to elementary school allows space for AMS to host grades six through eight

Financial Considerations:

- Creates a long-term facility plan for preschool through eighth grade
- Eliminates the need for inefficient, temporary portable classrooms
- Uses current building sites to keep costs down
- Full solution for for the district by addressing the elementary facilities through bond and middle school facilities through capital reserve funds
- Replaces antiquated systems with healthy, efficient systems
- The elementary building is cost comparative, if not less expensive, than a renovation because of the additional space needed as well as repair/replacement of antiquated systems.

For a full review of the history of this project, enrollment data, and options considered, please go to jfac.sau39.org or view the Deliberative session recording and slides available on sau39.org.

This is an important moment in the trajectory of our community schools, and the board encourages in-depth review of this article. In past years, voting in the town elections have not been particularly strong. Voting in the town election is where these decisions take place. Last year, over 3,500 registered voters cast a ballot in the town elections compared to nearly twice that amount in the 2022 federal election. On town voting day, every vote and voice counts. We hope that you and all eligible members of your household will come to the polls on March 14 to vote.

Article 13 – FY24 Proposed Budget

The proposed budget for FY24 is \$32,399,486, a 3.9% increase (\$1,229,578) over the FY23 default budget we are currently operating under. The FY24 default budget is \$31,996,633, a decrease of \$1.3% from the FY24 proposed budget (\$402,853).

The main drivers of budget increases are:

- Special education programming and services based on student needs. This includes increased transportation needs and costs.
- A new full-time kindergarten teacher and kindergarten para-professional to bring kindergarten to seven classes based on enrollment projections. This was reduced to six for this current school year due to an unexpectedly large first grade cohort.
- Library reading specialists. A focus on literacy education adds a library assistant at the elementary level and a reading specialist for the middle school. Interim superintendent Steve Chamberlin and the board are united in the effort to increase reading skills for all students, creating a more solid foundation for education and life.
- Two special education fellows are in the budget in a proposed partnership with Saint Anselm College. These fellows are already qualified as regular teachers but are pursuing special education certifications. This represents the addition of two full-time special education teachers at a cost of just \$50,000.
- We are proposing the addition of a full-time facilities technician for Clark-Wilkins, creating efficiency in caring for the building while also opening it up for additional community use.
- A cook position is being added to Clark-Wilkins to alleviate staffing pressure in this building.
- Technology. We are proposing a 2:1 student-to-laptop program for fifth grade. The purchase of these devices will also help replace severely outdated computers for grades six through eight.
- Our allocation for the SAU budget has increased.
- There are also increases in transportation for the next year of our bus contract, special services transportation, and overall fuel costs.

This year's proposed budget is an increasingly important one for this district. We are currently operating on a default budget after last year's proposed did not pass. When a district has a second consecutive default, the base of the new default would revert back to the last voted budget in FY22. This means that it's increasingly difficult to meet the districts every day, mandatory needs, and it would severely handicap the opportunity to pursue our goals, including the educational building block of literacy achievement for all students.

Article 14 – AEA Collective Bargaining Agreement

The board has come to a new agreement with the Amherst Education Association after last year's four-year proposed deal did not pass. The new agreement is a three-year deal that would start July 1, 2023.

There were a few initiatives in this year's negotiations for the board – fixing a broken salary schedule, attracting and retaining teachers, and increasing educational time for students. The board is pleased to present the positive results in these categories.

- The new salary schedule levels out the step increments which were inconsistent in the current schedule, ranging from two to greater than four percent. The increase is now 3% until it rises to 3.2% over the final steps of each track. There are also 20 total steps, an increase from the previous 18.
- It eliminates the 'jump step' that took place between steps 17 & 18, which resulted in teachers receiving increases of roughly 12 percent in that year. In addition to the unsustainable year-over-year jump, this 'jump step' resulted in a teacher with a bachelor's degree earning more than those with a master's with the same level of experience.
- Starting pay has been raised to \$45,000. This makes Amherst more attractive to new teachers beginning their careers and it allows us to retain those teachers who could be attracted to districts with higher pay in those earlier years. These gaps are now drastically reduced.
- There is a new, full student day on the calendar beginning with the second year of the contract.
- New teachers will have three additional days for summer training, bringing them up to speed on Amherst's programs and curriculum. This is invaluable to someone new to the district or a teacher beginning their career.
- Veteran teachers will have a new professional development day added in years two and three, removing six late-start days from the student calendar. PD days provide valuable training for all teachers while the removal of late-start days provides increased, continuous educational time for students.
- There is no broad-based salary increase with the creation of the new salary schedule in year one. Year two will see a 3.5% increase followed by 3% increase in year three.

The board believes this new contract provides reasonable increases for teachers (3-7% per year the majority of members) in an unknown inflationary cycle, and it increases valuable educational time in the classroom for students. Should this article not pass, teachers will have a second straight year without any compensation raise or step increases, making retaining and attracting teachers an increasingly difficult task for administration.

Article 15 – Special Meeting

If Article 14 fails, this article would give the board the option to host a special meeting to come to a new financial agreement with the AEA. This would then be presented to voters in a public hearing and deliberative session before another voting day would be held over the summer.

Article 16 – ASSA Collective Bargaining Agreement

This article presents a new three-year collective contract with the Amherst Support Staff Association, replacing a five-year agreement that expires June 30, 2023. The board's focus here was similar to the AEA goals – creating a new salary schedule that is competitive to the overall job market.

While the AEA contract focused, in part, on being competitive with other school districts, the ASSA salary schedule has a much broader competitive mandate. When we hire paraprofessionals, office managers, kitchen works, etc., we are not only competing with schools but with the regular open job market. Drive practically anywhere and you will see job postings averaging \$15, \$17, even \$20 starting pay. Our current ASSA salary schedule is simply outdated.

Highlights of the new agreement with ASSA:

- Starting pay will range from \$14.75 to \$18.00, up from \$12.23-\$16.64 currently.
- We reduced the number of steps in the schedule from 40 to 20, making each step more financially beneficial while reducing the time it takes to reach 'max earning potential' in the district.
- Differentials have been raised to better compensate additional degrees and certifications. Support staff covering regular teaching duties will also be compensated more appropriately.
- A new mentor program will be established to increase performance and drive employee retention.
- Additional changes are being made to staff evaluation and development programs.

Simply put – these individuals were no longer being paid in line with market conditions, making it difficult (and in some cases impossible) to find qualified, dedicated staff to fill positions critical to the education and care of students in the district.

Article 17 – Special Meeting, ASSA Contract

If Article 16 fails, this article would give the board the option to host a special meeting to come to a new financial agreement with the ASSA. This would then be presented to voters in a public hearing and deliberative session before another voting day would be held over the summer.

Article 18 – Capital Reserve Fund

Regardless of the outcome of Articles 12 & 13, the current buildings continue to need maintenance and repairs. The school district has a long-term plan to fund major capital projects and this capital reserve fund is key to fulfilling those plans. We are currently in year four of a twenty year plan, and there is a balance of \$1,368,000 in the fund. However, a large portion of those funds are being allocated to a roof and unit ventilator replacement project to help make Amherst Middle School water-tight.

The money raised by this warrant will not come through added taxes but from surplus funds at the end of the current school year. This contribution to the CRF will support the funding of the following projects. If the new school projects pass, these plans may be altered accordingly.

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Contribution</u>	<u>Withdrawal</u>	<u>Balance</u>
Balance			\$1,368,000
FY23/24	\$605,000	\$1,673,000**	\$300,000
FY25	\$675,000	\$10,000	\$965,000
FY26	\$675,000	\$1,340,000	\$300,000
FY27	\$675,000	\$380,000	\$595,000
FY28	\$550,000	\$322,000	\$823,000

- **FY23/24-Roof and Unit Ventilators**
- **FY25-AMS Outdoor Courts**
- **FY26-AMS Emergency Generator; Clark Sealcoat, Boilers, Emergency Lights, Ext. Walls, Multipurpose Walls & Ceilings; Wilkins Boilers, HVAC, Lighting, Ext. Walls, Caulking Trim, Soffit, Fascia**
- **FY27-AMS Roof PVC Membrane**
- **FY 28-AMS Elevator, Radio Systems; Clark Int. Walls/Ceilings/Floors; Wilkins Sealcoat, Lighting, Radio**

Article 19 – Tax Cap Petition Article

The ballot will also feature a new petition warrant article submitted by a resident after collecting the requisite number of signatures. In short, this article, if passed, would limit the school district's budget increases to no more than a two percent impact on taxpayers. While, in theory,

this represents a thoughtful approach to a constrained budget, in reality it takes the budget process virtually out of the hands of the board and the administration.

If this article passes, the board and administration would no longer be utilizing a zero-based budget to thoughtfully plan out needs and goals, but instead would simply apply calculations to line items to fit the mandatory limit. In a year when our default budget is a 2.9% increase, this presents unintended consequences.

Think of this likely extreme but certainly possible example: We have an increase in special needs programming for students, as we do in our FY24 budget. Since we are above the 2% cap impact, we might need to counter these legally-required services by cutting three first grade teachers. This would mean, using the FY24 first-grade enrollment of 140 students, we could go from eight classes to five classes, resulting in an average class size increasing from 17.5 to 28 students. Yes, this example is an extreme but scenarios like this would develop throughout the budget.

The board voted unanimously against this article.

We are grateful for your continued support of our schools and we look forward to seeing you on voting day. If you have questions, please email ASB@sau39.org or attend one of our monthly meetings. The board meeting schedule is available on www.SAU39.org.

